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ABSTRACT

Innovative methods devised to obtain the desired number of Anglo, Mexican American and American Indian women for a study of the health of recently widowed low income women are explored. Social and health service agencies proved generally unable to assist by contacting their clients. Different techniques were found to be successful for recruiting and retaining members of the different ethnic groups. Newspaper advertisements and letters sent in response to obituary notices were the most successful in identifying Anglo widows. Mexican-American widows did not respond to impersonal advertisement or letters, but were located primarily through churches. Most Mexican-American widows agreed to be interviewed only after an initial personal visit from the bilingual, middle-aged interviewer. Few eligible American Indian widows were identified, the population was also very small, and again the majority of referrals came from the churches. Significantly, it was found that no widows considered the interview process at all intrusive. Most expressed relief at being able to discuss their experiences and problems with a nonfamily member, the interviewer. (Author/JMM)

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IDENTIFYING ANGLO, MEXICAN-AMERICAN AND AMERICAN INDIAN RESPONDENTS FOR A STUDY OF RECENT WIDOWS: SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCHERS

CYNTHIA L. TOBIAS
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses innovative methods devised to obtain the desired number of Anglo, Mexican-American and American Indian women for a study of the health of recently widowed low income women. Social and health service agencies proved generally unable to assist by contacting their clients. Different techniques were found to be successful for recruiting and retaining members of the different ethnic groups. It was found that newspaper advertisements and letters sent in response to obituary notices were the most successful technique for identifying Anglo widows. Mexican-American widows did not respond to impersonal advertisements or letters, but were located primarily through churches. Most Mexican-American widows agreed to be interviewed only after an initial personal visit from the bilingual middle-aged interviewer. Few eligible American Indian widows were identified, although the population was also very small, and again the majority of the referrals came from the churches. Significantly it was found that no widows considered the interview process at all intrusive. Most expressed relief at being able to discuss their experiences and problems with a nonfamily member, the interviewer.

IDENTIFYING ANGLO, MEXICAN-AMERICAN and AMERICAN INDIAN RESPONDENTS FOR A STUDY OF RECENT WIDOWS: SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCHERS

Researchers seeking populations with particular characteristics are faced with difficulties when no readily available directories or community agencies provide easy identification of the participants being sought. This was the case in a recent study of widowhood, the purpose of which was to investigate the coping behaviors of newly widowed women over 40 years of age in three ethnic groups, Anglo, Mexican-American and American Indian. The study looked at how widows cope with their problems, with widowhood itself, and with strains and changes in their family, work, personality and finances. The researchers wanted to determine which qualities characterized the successful copers, where "success" was measured in terms of self-perceived physical and psychological health and the extent to which health changed over time. The research was carried out in Tucson, Arizona, a metropolitan area typical of the Southwest in having the three ethnic groups in its population.

The data collection methodology involved a longitudinal survey, consisting of a series of three interviews over a period of about a year. The interviews lasted from 1 1/2 to 5 hours depending on the respondent and included both structured, closed-ended questions and open-ended questions. The topics covered included: perceived psychological and physical health symptoms, experiences relating to the death of the spouse and adjustments to widowhood, the widow's social support network and basic demographic data. All responses to open-ended questions were tape recorded and transcribed for detailed analysis.

The project staff encountered many challenging problems locating an adequate number of respondents to fill the sample quotas. Respondents were

required to be women over the age of 40, with incomes less than $1000 per month, who had been widowed in the six-month period preceding the first interview. Because the research involved quantitative as well as qualitative analysis comparing across ethnic groups, a relatively large number of respondents, ideally 150 in all, had to be identified. This paper discusses the methods used to identify the subjects and evaluates their effectiveness. The techniques discussed here should be of use to any researcher doing cross-ethnic work on populations whose total numbers are quite small and to researchers studying potentially sensitive topics.

At the beginning of the research, we did not anticipate that locating respondents would be a problem. We had assumed that they would be located and contacted through various community social service and health agencies which had offered their cooperation when the grant proposal for the study was being prepared. However, when these agencies were recontacted in October 1984 for assistance in locating respondents, many of the persons previously contacted were no longer employed there. Project staff members attempted to contact every local social service and health agency by letter and by telephone, but they could not obtain commitments for assistance from them. Perhaps the agencies felt too overburdened to identify widows for us in addition to all of their other casework. Another project staff member attempted a second round of contact one month later and at that time most agencies responded negatively to the request for assistance in locating widows and became very protective of their clients. It should be noted that we did not ask these agencies to provide the names of recent widows; rather, we requested they contact clients regarding their possible interest in participating in the study. Although the project staff member stressed this fact, the agencies were not forthcoming in

providing referrals to us. There were only two exceptions: a Catholic social service agency, perhaps the agency that works most closely with the poor in Tucson, cooperated in providing respondents for the study, and some respondents were located through the senior citizen program at a local hospital.

An established support group for widows and widowers, catering primarily to the middle and upper income groups, also declined to cooperate in locating participants for the study, stating that it was inappropriate to intervene and conduct research less than six months after the death of a spouse. Personnel at social service and health agencies also frequently gave this reason for non-cooperation.

After the established local support group and most of the social service and health agencies refused their assistance, the project staff began to develop alternative approaches to solving the problem of locating participants. We contacted Tucson daily, weekly, and neighborhood newspapers, including those serving the Mexican-American and American Indian populations, and they cooperated by publishing articles about the study and requests for participants. Radio stations cooperated by making public service announcements. After several Anglo women replied to these media reports, we decided to place classified advertisements mentioning that a small monetary reimbursement would be available to widows in exchange for their participation in the study. The combination of the newspaper stories and the advertisements provided a substantially larger percentage of respondents from the Anglo population (39 percent) than the social service and health agencies which did later provide some cooperation and referrals (16 percent). (See Table 1.)

Table 1

ANGLO RESPONDENTS

SOURCE	NUMBER OF WIDOWS	PERCENTAGE OF WIDOWS
Newspapers	25	39%
Social Service/ Health Agencies	10	16%
Other Widow	2	3%
Church	3	5%
Obituary Letter	21	33%
Library Notice	2	3%
No Indication of How Located	1	1%
TOTAL	64	100%

Another method used to locate subjects involved sending letters to widows listed in the obituary notices in newspapers. The local newspapers agreed to compile the obituaries from the previous few months, charging only a nominal fee for photocopying. The project staff then reviewed these notices and obtained addresses for the widows so that letters could be sent requesting their participation in the study. Mexican-American women received letters in both Spanish and English. The response to this approach was particularly good among the Anglo population. Although 33 percent of the Anglo respondents were obtained in this way, the approach was completely unsuccessful for locating Mexican-American widows. To obtain addresses for the widows listed

in the obituaries, project staff members cross-referenced the names with those listed in the telephone directory. Because many Mexican-American women had unlisted telephone numbers or no phones at all, they could not be located by this method.

Project staff members had feared that contacting widows by letter by using the obituary notices was too direct an approach and would produce negative results. Anglo widows responded well to these letters however, and even though no Mexican-American respondents were obtained in this manner, none reacted negatively or complained. Mexican-American respondents later contacted through the churches confirmed that they had received the letters but had thought that someone would be contacting them in person. They did not express any negative opinions about receiving the letters.

The project staff had great difficulty in locating enough Mexican-American participants for the study. Although many Anglo widows responded to the newspaper articles and advertisements and to the letters sent to them, very few Mexican-American women were located by these methods. As of January 1985 we had obtained only nine Mexican-American respondents out of a total of around fifty sought. Although the churches, both Catholic and Protestant, had seemed to be excellent places to obtain names of Mexican-American widows, when we contacted them early in the study they appeared hostile to the idea of assisting. The project staff decided that the lack of Mexican-American participants warranted our requesting the cooperation of the churches once again, and an interviewer went directly to the churches with a list of names of widows. These names were compiled from obituary notices which listed the widow as having had masses or services held in the respective churches. One priest agreed to cooperate and allowed the

interviewer to look at the death register for the addresses of those widows who had had masses for their deceased spouses. Once the cooperation of one priest had been obtained and the interviewer knew she should ask to see the death register, she found the other churches were also willing to lend assistance in locating widows.

Obtaining the cooperation of the churches was extremely important in locating Mexican-American respondents, because of the close-knit nature of the Mexican-American community and individual families. The cooperation of the churches seemed to assure the widows and their families of the authenticity of the research. In fact, many of the children of the participating widows called the church to verify that their mother's name and address had indeed been provided by the church. After the initial success with the Catholic church, we also contacted Protestant churches, including evangelical and fundamentalist churches, which provided a number of Mexican-American respondents for the study. In light of the importance and centrality of religion in the Mexican-American community, it appears therefore that the best method of locating these respondents is through the churches which provided 62 percent of the Mexican-American respondents. (See Table 2) In addition to enabling project staff members to locate respondents, the cooperation of the churches provided reassurance to the widows and their families.

After obtaining the names of Mexican-American widows through the churches, a second problem arose with regard to contacting them. The interviewer found the telephone was an ineffective method of scheduling interviews with Mexican Americans. They often did not understand the concept of the research being carried out and would respond negatively, stating that they were not interested in participating. The interviewer, a middle-aged

bilingual woman, then decided to visit the women in person to establish face to face contact with them. She spoke with them in Spanish and took the time to establish rapport with them. Once being put at ease, the women agreed to schedule an interview. Such personal contact had to be re-established at the time of scheduling the second and third interviews, as well as for the first interview. For subsequent interviews, the interviewer visited the widows, reminded them about the study, and took the time to talk with them about their recent experiences before trying to schedule the interview. This method had to be employed to obtain many of the interviews with Mexican-American women. In the Anglo population, on the other hand, the telephone was sufficient to inform widows of the study and to schedule second and third interviews, since many of these women were more familiar with the concept of research. We should point out that the bilingual interviewer was paid on an hourly basis for time worked, rather than on a fixed fee per interview basis. This increased the cost of the Mexican-American interviews, due to the amount of time spent locating respondents and establishing rapport, but was essential in obtaining sufficient respondents.

Table 2

MEXICAN-AMERICAN RESPONDENTS

SOURCE	NUMBER OF WIDOWS	PERCENTAGE OF WIDOWS
Newspapers	5	9%
Social Service/ Health Agencies	8	15%
Other Widow	1	2%
Church	33	62%
Mortuary	3	6%
No Indication of How Located	3	6%
TOTAL	53	100%

The most difficult group with which to establish contact was the American Indian widows. (See Table 3) We made contact with a staff member of an Indian organization who did not appear hostile to the idea of the study, although no referrals were obtained through this agency. Other social service agencies working with American Indians were hostile to the study however, and responded very negatively to any requests for aid in locating American Indian widows. In retrospect, in the case of American Indians, perhaps the best method would have been to have established contact with and requested aid from the respective tribal councils, the Papago (now known as Tohono O'odham) and the Yaqui, prior to starting the project, since these tribal councils move slowly and take time to act on such a request. Because no contact or agreements had been made with the tribal councils before the study began, the project staff was forced to seek alternative methods of locating American

Indian participants, as they had had to do with Anglos and Mexican-Americans. In the case of the Papago tribe, we made contact with widows through referrals from the Indian Health Service. This appeared to be an effective method of obtaining respondents and three Papago women agreed to participate in the study, although one dropped out at a later date. In the case of the Yaqui tribe, locating widows was more difficult. The interviewer contacted the head of the tribal council to request assistance and received a very negative response forbidding any research by the University of Arizona among the tribal members on reservation land. This refusal was based on extremely negative experiences with previous research performed by other scholars. Consequently, all interviews with Yaqui widows had to be done off the reservation. Again, we had to seek alternative methods of locating Yaqui widows. The interviewer discovered one widow through a church and after contact was established with her, she recommended two other women. Clearly once a

Table 3

AMERICAN INDIAN RESPONDENTS

SOURCE	NUMBER OF WIDOWS	PERCENTAGE OF WIDOWS
Indian Health Service	2	33%
Church	3	50%
Other Widow	1	17%
TOTAL	6	100%

positive contact had been made within the community, it became easier to locate other women willing to participate in the research. In any future study it would be wise to recognize in advance the difficulties in obtaining the cooperation of American Indian officials and to establish very early contact with tribal councils to try to obtain their approval of the study. We should also note that county statistics showed less than 50 deaths of American Indian males over the age of 40 for the previous year, so our sample amounted to at least 10 percent of the total population (assuming all of the men left widows) which was actually quite good.

CONCLUSIONS

The most obvious resistance to a study of this nature is the complaint that the research will interfere with the grieving process of the widow. This complaint was, for the most part, proven unfounded as the widows who participated informed interviewers that they found the study very helpful and informative for them, and that they did not feel it was an intrusion in their lives. The problems in locating respondents did not arise from the widows' resistance to participation; rather, they mainly resulted from the project's early and mistaken assumption that social service agencies would provide the most assistance. We placed too much reliance on this assumption and did not put enough effort into developing other methods of locating respondents until it became essential to do so. In the case of Anglo women, the direct approaches such as contact through obituary letters, stories and advertisements in local newspapers, and notices in public libraries and laundromats, were most effective in obtaining participants. In the case of Mexican-American women there is no question that obtaining the assistance of the various Catholic and Protestant churches and locating widows through their death registers and lists provided the greatest number of respondents. That method also reassured the widows and their families about the study. Obituary letters to Mexican-American women did not produce a negative response, however the interviewer discovered that the Mexican-American women who had received such letters and were later contacted through the churches were waiting for someone to contact them following receipt of the letter and did not understand that they were being asked to contact project staff. It is obvious that the close-knit nature of the Mexican-American community makes it necessary to obtain the cooperation of the traditional religious institutions

which can provide this reassurance. American Indian women were the most difficult to reach of all of the sample groups and advance preparation, through contact with tribal councils would be necessary for future studies. It also appears advisable to pay the interviewer on an hourly rather than a per case basis when obtaining and retaining respondents requires a substantial amount of time. The Anglo interviewer was paid on a per case basis and the second interview response rate was lower for that sample.

NOTES

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